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UNITARIAN BELIEF

V. Unitarian Belief in regard to the Supernatural Element in Christianity

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SERMONS

OF

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Unitarian Belief in regard to the Supernatural Element in Christianity.

EPHESIANS iv. 6.—"One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all."

ROMANS xi. 36.—"For of him, and through him, and to him are all things."

"What do Unitarians believe in regard to the Supernatural Element in Christianity?" This is the subject of my present discourse.

Unitarians differ among themselves very widely in regard to this question. Some deny any supernatural element, and say that Christianity is a purely human religion, evolved out of previously existing opinions by a natural process. Others regard it as created by a miraculous influence of God, and make a broad gulf between Judaism and Christianity as divinely revealed religion, and all other faiths, which they would call natural and human.

For example, Dr. Channing, in his Dudleian lecture, tells us that "Christianity is in itself, in its very essence, a miraculous religion," and that it is "a supernatural provision for the recovery of the human race." On the other hand, Theodore Parker, considering Supernaturalism as meaning that God from time to time interferes with the course of nature by miraculous intervention, opposes it as a poor and small view of the sources and grounds of religion.

But what do we mean by supernatural? Something

above nature. And what do we mean by nature? All that exists around and within us in time and space; all the vast order of the universe; all the great procession of sun and stars above, plants and animals below; all the sweep of force and the restraint of law,—in a word, the great nexus and web of the things seen and temporal. And is there nothing above this, as its cause; nothing below it, as its support; nothing within it, as its animating power? If God exists, then something supernatural exists. If the universe is not a dead machine, working blindly on, then there is a supernatural power from which it draws its being and becomes alive. Unless we are atheists, we must believe in something supernatural above and around that which we call natural.

Moreover, according to Christianity and all sound philosophy, our own being has its roots in the supernatural world. We live every day from God. "In him we live and move and have our being." Every thought we think, every act we perform, is at once natural and supernatural. By our body we are a part of nature, subject to natural laws; by our soul we are above nature, because our life is hid in God. If man were a body, and nothing more, he would be a mere machine. Mechanical philosophers, who see nothing real but what the senses show us, are obliged by their theory to regard man as only a machine, —an automaton. If man is merely a body, then his freedom is an illusion. A poor puppet, he moves as he is pulled by the wires which we call the nerves. Man is body, and yet far more than body. His body is a machine working automatically, limited to a particular place, to a particular time; but his soul roams through all space and all time. He rises into universal ideas, conceives of

necessary and eternal existences; finite himself, he cannot disbelieve in the infinite; ephemeral and mortal, he everywhere has faith in immortality. Thus man is not only natural, but supernatural. By one side of his nature he is subject to physical law: by the other he transcends all physical law. He belongs at once to the world of matter and the world of mind, to the domain of sense and that of soul, to time and to eternity. By his body and earthly senses he communes with all the sights and sounds of nature, with all the knowledge of time, with human nature and human history. By his soul he communes with absolute goodness, truth, beauty, right, and enters into loving relations with the Omnipotent and Eternal Being.

When Jesus said that not a sparrow could fall without the Father, when he taught that every hair of our head is numbered, when he saw in the regal coloring of the meadow flower a beauty given it directly by God, he showed us that all things visible and temporal are forever created anew, moulded afresh by a Divine Presence. When the apostle said that God "is all in all," that "from him and through him and to him are all things," he taught the doctrine of a supernatural Power and Presence in all the things of earth and time. Thus, according to the Christian view, we are obliged to say that all things are at once natural and supernatural: natural in their phenomena, supernatural in their substance; natural by being subject to the laws of space and time, supernatural as proceeding from Him who is above space and time; natural as belonging to the great order of things, supernatural as coming from the source and support of that great order.

To this general statement it seems to me impossible to offer any sufficient objection, if we believe in God as Jesus and the apostles believed in him. He is not a being who made the world as a man makes a clock, who winds it up, sets it going, regulates it, and then lets it run on for a time by forces and laws of its own, only coming once in a while to repair it when out of order, and to wind it up again. That is the old theory of divine interference, the old view taken of a supernatural revelation, the old view taken of miracles as a violation and interruption of the laws of nature. That view can no longer be maintained. If we believe in God at all, we must believe that he is the present and constant creator, immanent in all things, the life of the universe, and must say with the psalmist: "Whither shall I go from thy spirit, whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend into heaven, thou art there; if I make my bed in the grave, thou art there also. If I take the wings of the morning, and flee into the uttermost parts of the sea, even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand hold me."

All things are natural, because all things are subject to law. All things are supernatural, because all things proceed at every moment from God.

But now we must ask another question. When Christianity came, when Jesus was born, was this merely a development of what had gone before, or was it a new impulse given to human progress from a higher world?

One class of thinkers say "Christianity, like all other religions, was the ripe fruit of human nature. It came according to the law of evolution. It was the necessary result of previous events. It was the inevitable outcome of history. It came in the fulness of time, according to

inexorable laws: it could not have come a day sooner or later."

But if we grant, as we must, that all the historic forces in the world work on according to law, who shall say that some other forces, angelic or divine, may not flow into human souls from higher worlds? Physical science tells us that the earth has to be forever helped from without, that the very atmosphere receives new supplies from the circumambient ether. If we are spirits, inwardly in communion with higher spirits, inwardly in perpetual union with God himself, why is it impossible that new influences, never before in the world, shall from time to time flow into human souls, creating prophets, heroes, saints, and martyrs? Do you say this would be a violation of law? Not at all. Suppose new thoughts should be communicated to my mind from a higher world,— why is that a violation of law any more than when new thoughts are communicated to my mind from yours?

There is still another reason for believing that man belongs to two worlds,— that of time and that of eternity. This reason is the universal instinct and habit of prayer. In all ages and in all races, men have prayed to invisible powers, expecting an answer of help. The lowest races pray, the highest also pray. It is the testimony of human experience that there is always an open communion between the natural and supernatural world, and that the higher world flows into ours,— not occasionally or by some abrupt incursion, but by a steadily working law. This is the testimony of religious experience in all times and in every form of human religion.

There was once a boy named Thomas Crane, living in Quincy, apprentice to a stone-cutter. He had heard the

regular preaching of the churches, and it did not arouse his mind. One day there came to the place the apostle of a new faith, teaching the universal love of God. The name of this prophet was Hosea Ballou. The spark fell into the boy's soul and took fire. On many a Sunday, this boy, too poor to pay for a wagon or a horse, walked ten miles to Boston to hear Hosea Ballou preach in School Street, and then walked ten miles back. That spark kindled a fire that never went out. The boy grew to be a man; was faithful, upright, industrious, benevolent; gave largely to the Universalist colleges and churches while he lived, and his children have just honored his memory by putting up in Quincy a noble hall for the uses of the public library.

In this there was no violation of law. But suppose that, instead of having the new thought given to him from without by Hosea Ballou, it had been dropped into his mind from within, by some spiritual influence. Would that have violated law any more than in the other case? In both cases it was necessary that the boy's mind should be prepared for this influence; in both cases it was necessary that he should consent to receive the truth and obey it; and in both cases it was necessary for him to receive it from abroad. In neither case would any law of his mind be violated by this influx of the truth, whether it came from man or from God.

If we admit that there is a divine spirit in immediate contact with our own, if we admit that there is a world of spiritual existence above and around us, then there is nothing improbable in such seed dropping from above, and, when it falls into prepared minds, bringing forth wonderful fruit. And, if not improbable in itself, then the

theory grows probable when we consider how the world has been moulded and modified by exceptional men. In the midst of a prosaic time, a great poet like Milton suddenly appears; in a sceptical age, when religion has run to a trite orthodoxy or a cold morality, comes a Wesley; in a nation and time very matter-of-fact arises a Swedenborg, unintelligible to his own age. Often a generation or two must pass by before the divine meaning of such apparitions becomes evident. Then they are found to be great creative influences and guides. How often is the prophet only a voice crying in the wilderness! You say he is "the product of the times." Why, then, does not the time recognize its own creation? Why do men crucify him instead of accepting him? If the prophet is the natural outcome of the previous development, why is he despised and rejected, persecuted and stoned, by the very age which called for him and brought him forth?

Some geologists say that the only explanation of geological phenomena is to admit that changes come by sudden catastrophes as well as by gradual evolution. So human history and human life advance by crises no less than by development. And, when these crises come, we commonly find that they are determined by the arrival of some great and exceptional soul, not the ripe outcome of the past order of things, but the beginning of a new series. As Virgil says, "The great order of things begins anew." *

There was a power in the soul of Moses and in the soul of Mohammed not derived from surrounding circumstances. The convictions within them had to fight

* "Magnus, ex integro, sæculorum nascitur Ordo."

against the stubborn prejudices and obstinate unbelief of their time; and, after a long and desolating war, the new faith rose on the ruins of the old opinions and the inveterate habits of their contemporaries.

These great reformers of the race, who have initiated radical changes in history, have themselves believed in the help and inspiration of some higher power, in some leading above their own plan and purpose. Abraham believed that the Lord sent him from his own country to found a new nation. Moses was confident that he received his power from God. Some influence from above stirred in their souls; some power they could not resist sent them on their way, and the result showed whether this power was divine. Whenever the movement so inaugurated ends in confusion, immorality, and the degradation of mankind, we know that its author was self-deceived. But when it results in a vast progress onward and upward, a progress which regenerates society, makes a new heaven and a new earth, purifies morals, and goes on its beneficent way during many centuries, are we wrong in saying that a new creative force entered the world by the means of these select souls?

I do not confine these revelations to the Jewish or Christian believers. I am sure that all great religions are more or less revealed religions; that man by himself is wholly inadequate to create them. Their founders and authors are the prophets of God. Some are greater and higher than others; but all come for good, and have a supernatural as well as natural origin.

What, then, shall we say of the religion of Jesus? Wherein did it differ from the others? Wherein was it more supernatural than they? It differed as the ripe

fulfilment differs from the imperfect attempt, as the end differs from the beginning. The other religions gave glimpses of God, as the sun appears when half hidden by mists and vapors. Christ showed us the Father, as the sun is seen when rising in unclouded glory and supreme majesty. Christ teaches love as the essence of all religion, love as the sum of all duty, love as the essence of heaven here and heaven hereafter. This is the summit of revelation; this is the fulness of him who fills all in all.

What shall we say of the miracles of Jesus? Are they myths and errors, mistakes of the record, or are they infringements of universal law? To me they seem neither the one nor the other. They are told so simply and naturally, so little is made of them, they seem to be so interwoven into the story as an essential part of it, and are for the most part such a natural expression of the character of Jesus, that I am forced to believe, as a matter of history, that he possessed some marvellous power over nature. Nor is this power wholly unexampled. There have been sporadic instances of a similar kind scattered through history. We cannot doubt that physical disease has been often cured by the influence of mind over mind, of which medical works contain frequent records. These phenomena belong to some obscure region of the human soul, and to latent physical and moral powers, which will be better understood hereafter than now. It is highly improbable that these stories should have been invented to glorify Jesus, since the same record tells us that he refused to perform these works as signs of his power. "A wicked generation seeketh for a sign, and there shall no sign be given them." Nor is it necessary to suppose them violations of law, but rather manifestations of higher

physical forces. In a being so richly endowed as Jesus, it is natural, and not unnatural, to find united with his supreme moral and spiritual power these other capacities, undeveloped then, and undeveloped even now, in other men.

Except as illustrating the character of Jesus, most of these wonderful works have to us at present little value. But there is one remarkable exception. The only miraculous event in the life of Jesus which is mentioned by the Apostle Paul is the resurrection. But on this he lays great emphasis. He says, "If Christ be not raised, your faith is vain." Let us, then, consider this for a moment.

The power and value of the resurrection do not depend on whether the earthly body of Jesus rose from the grave or not. The power of the resurrection was in the faith that Jesus after the crucifixion was not dead, but alive; and also in this, that he had gone up into a higher world, yet one not far off, from whence he could come to show himself to his disciples and speak to them. This was their great experience. He was not dead, but alive, — alive in a world of glory, victorious over the powers of evil. His enemies had not conquered him: he was still to be the King of the world, the spiritual leader of his race. Death lost its sting. Why should the disciples fear to die, since death was to lift them to that sphere of peace and power where their Master was? They had seen him alive. He had not gone down, but gone up. Paul had nothing to say about the earthly body. What they saw was Christ himself. "He was seen of Peter, he was seen of James, last of all seen by me." Paul considers himself also "a witness of the resurrection." But, when Paul saw Jesus, he did not see his earthly body,

but his spiritual body. The power of the resurrection was that they saw the risen Christ. That great sight changed these timid disciples into brave preachers of their Master's gospel; and I do not see how their change of conduct can be otherwise explained. Do not tell me that it was the working of their imagination, the delusion of their fancy. Delusion and error do not create such a force of conviction and conduct. Some great fact must have occurred to produce such an immense result as the foundation of the Christian religion.

I fully believe, then, that the disciples saw their risen Master,— saw him so often and so fully as to be sure of his continued and ascended being. This brought life and immortality to light. This created the Christian faith in immortal being. This keeps it alive to-day. Those who have given up Christianity have also usually given up faith in the hereafter. It has become to them a mere possibility,—a "great perhaps." But in proportion as men believe in Christ they rise above the fear of death, and see, as Stephen saw, "the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

And yet I do not consider the resurrection of Jesus as a violation of law. It was rather a revelation of law. It revealed the fact that all men rise. "In Adam all die, in Christ all are made alive." That is, as descendants from Adam, we know that we all die; as believers in Christ, we know we are all made more alive.

Thus the revelation of Jesus is supernatural, not as violating law, but as a revelation of higher law. The whole life of Christ is such a revelation. It shows how our poor human nature may be exalted; how sin shall not have any more dominion over us; how it is possible for

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man to rise above selfishness, deceit, and evil, and to live from God for man. The life of Jesus was both supernatural and natural. It was natural because it was a pure development of humanity, uncorrupted, undepraved, as God made it, and as he means it to be. It was supernatural as showing the perpetual presence in his soul of the higher world, the world of eternal truth and infinite goodness.

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